Seizing justice: The Greensboro 4

By Lynn Kessler July 23, 2010

Editor's Note: Today's post is written by guest blogger Lynn Kessler, a writer and producer at Smithsonian Networks. "Seizing Justice: The Greensboro 4" will premiere on the Smithsonian Channel Sunday, July 25, at 8 p.m. EST.

In the early '90s I was visiting Greensboro, North Carolina, for work when we drove past the Woolworth's store there. Someone commented that it was where the first lunch counter sit-ins <https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/6-legacy/freedom-struggle-2.html> had taken place. I wanted to go inside but was told, "it's just like every other Woolworth store now" and we kept driving.

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Carol W. Martin, "Elm Street, Showing the Woolworth Building," August 26, 1959, Greensboro Historical Museum Collection.

Last February, I was in front of the Woolworth's again. It turns out this wasn't just another Woolworth store. It was the location where four brave young men started a movement for social justice <https://americanhistory.si.edu/freedomandjustice/> that was eventually embraced in many cities throughout the country. What happened there changed our nation forever.

My reason for being there was to tell that story in a documentary called "Seizing Justice: The Greensboro 4" for Smithsonian Channel <http://www.smithsonianchannel.com/>, a young network (launched in 2007) that is turning out powerful, award-winning shows rich with the stories of this country.

This is the story of four young men, college freshmen, who grew impatient waiting for change and indignant that they were treated as second-class citizens in their own country, who sat down and demanded equal rights. Ezell Blair Jr. (now The Apostle Jibreel Khazan), Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil and David Richmond, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/webcast/greensboro_medal.html> students at North Carolina A&T, did just that 50 years ago, on Feb. 1, when they sat down at the whites-only Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro and asked to be served.

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Ezell A. Blair, Jr. (now Jibreel Khazan), Franklin E. McCain, Joseph A. McNeil, and David L. Richmond leave the Woolworth store after the first sit-in on February 1, 1960. (Courtesy of Greensboro News and Record)

Of course, they were refused service. They knew they would be. But every day they returned to the counter, and day-by-day the numbers of friends and supporters of their cause continued to grow. By the end of the first week <http://www.sitinmovement.org/history/greensboro-chronology.asp> there were a thousand students sitting-in, all putting into practice the tenets of non-violent protest they had learned from people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Ghandi and Thoreau. It is estimated that within six months 70,000 people were staging sit-ins around the country.

Although they faced taunts and both verbal and physical violence, they just kept coming back. They were willing to risk their lives for the things they believed in. Those are words that are easy to write and easy to say . . . but imagine actually doing that. I kept asking myself, what would I risk my life for?

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The 1963 photograph depicts students enduring taunts, mustard, and ketchup as they sat-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi. Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.

As the sit-ins continued in Greensboro, local politicians and business leaders were growing weary of the power the students had over the town. Boycotts and pickets meant customers were not coming to local stores and businesses <http://objectofhistory.org/objects/show/lunchcounter/87> to spend money. Students all over the country were sitting in now. Woolworth's had lost more than $200,000 in sales by July 1960—a lot of money back then. Woolworth's finally relented and on July 25, 1960, announced that the chain would desegregate its lunch counters nationwide. It was an incredible sea change if one considers that it was initiated by just four individuals who had nothing in their arsenal but determination and faith. Woolworth's lunch counters were open to everyone for the next 30 years—until the company's demise. And when Woolworth's finally went out of business, African-American leaders in Greensboro fought to preserve the building and its contents <http://www.sitinmovement.org/founders/index.asp>.

In Washington, curators at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History moved <https://americanhistory.si.edu/about/pubs/yeingst1.pdf> to save the lunch counter of the Greensboro Woolworth's. Today, there is an 8 foot section of the counter with its stools at the Smithsonian, with the rest of it remaining in the original Greensboro Woolworth's, which is now the International Civil Rights Center and Museum <http://www.sitinmovement.org/>.

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This section of the Woolworth's lunch counter with 4 stools is on view in the National Museum of American History, second floor east. A 15 minute historic theater performance invites you to "Join the Student Sit-Ins."

Three of the four gentlemen are still alive today. David Richmond died of cancer in 1990. He was described by the other three as the quiet, compassionate one. The other three are lovely men. Very smart, in some cases very funny, and always humble. I was honored to get to sit down with them and hear their stories. In many ways, they have become heroes to me.

<http://blog.americanhistory.si.edu/.a/6a00e553a80e1088340133f280872c970b-popup>

The three surviving members of the Greensboro Four (from left to right), Jibreel Khazan (formerly Ezell Blair, Jr.), Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil, participated in an oral history on February 4, 2010. View the Webcast <https://americanhistory.si.edu/webcast/townhall020410.html>.

A few months ago my stepfather asked why anyone would want to watch a show about such a negative time in our nation's history. Apparently, many Americans had written to the curators at the American history museum asking the same question when they procured <https://americanhistory.si.edu/about/pubs/bunch-yeingst.pdf> and then exhibited the lunch counter. For me, it wasn't a negative time in American history, because change for the better was taking place. But, I took a better answer from Fath Davis Ruffins, an historian and curator at the museum, who said that "American history is built around a struggle to achieve an ideal nation. We haven't perhaps yet achieved freedom and justice <https://americanhistory.si.edu/freedomandjustice/> for all. But struggling to do that, to make our country more free, more just and more equal, has been the struggle of many generations over time" beginning with the American Revolution.

The idea that one person, or in this case four, can really make a difference has a long history in this country. To me, that is why the story of the Greensboro Four is worth telling. It is a truly American story about the power of individuals to effect change—a story powerful enough to inspire generations to come.

Tuesday night, the Smithsonian Networks and the National Museum of American History hosted a screening of "Seizing Justice: The Greensboro 4." Lunch counter food was served as guests stood near the original portion of the lunch counter along with Major General Joseph McNeil and the Apostle Jibreel Khazan, who came for the screening. There were many children there, too, who were learning the story of the Greensboro four for the first time. It was an amazing night. On the way home I asked my stepfather, who had attended, if he still wondered why I would want to produce a documentary on such a negative time in America's history. "No," he said. He thought it was a great story and one that would inspire. I thought so too.

On July 25, the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of Woolworth's lunch counters nationwide, "Seizing Justice: The Greensboro 4" will premiere on Smithsonian Channel at 8:00pm ET/PT. See a sneak peek now.

Lynn Kessler is a writer/producer for Smithsonian Networks.

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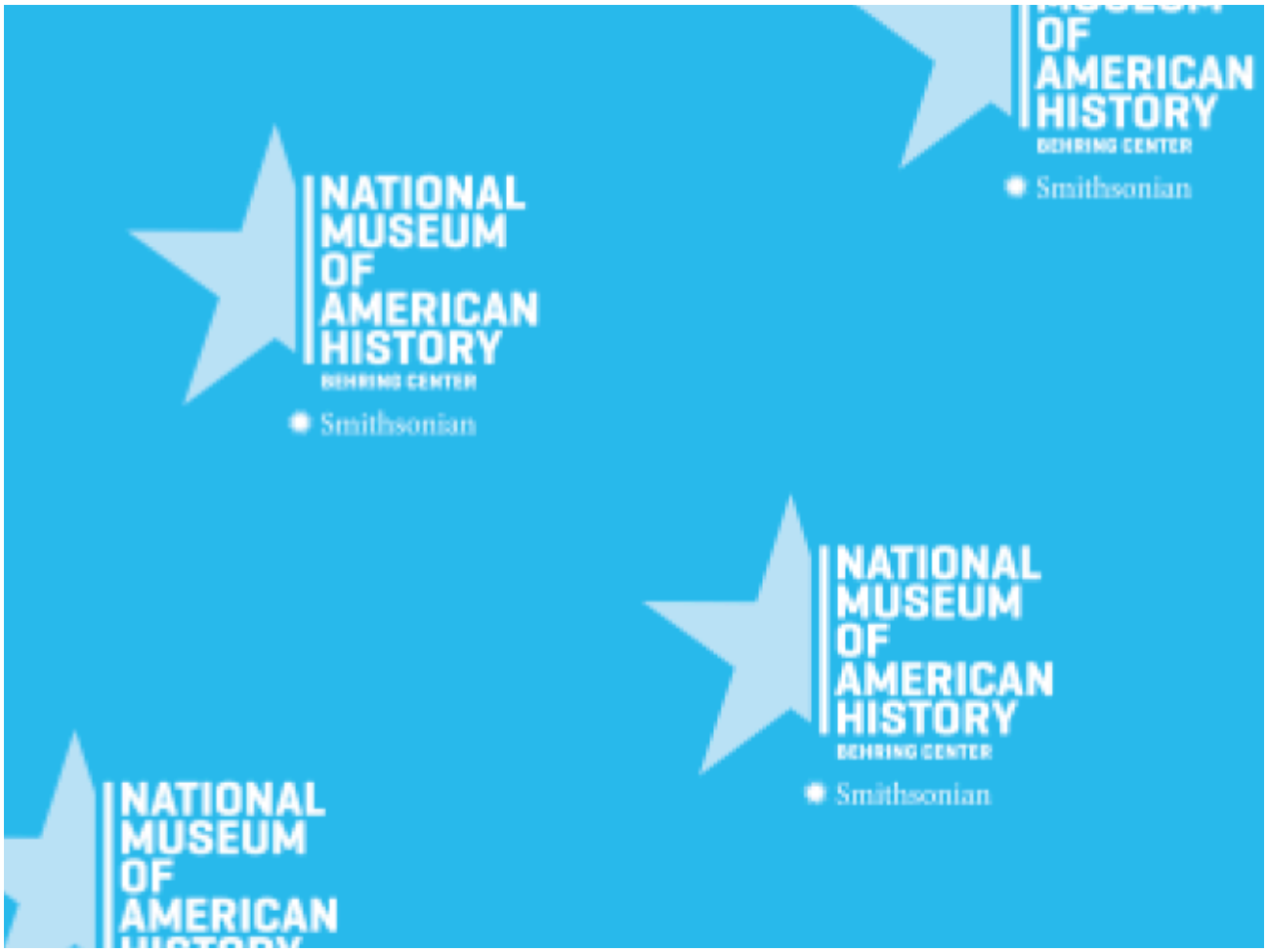

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Hours & Admission

Open every day, except December 25, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission is free and no tickets are required.

Location & Contact

1300 Constitution Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20560 <https://www.google.com/maps/place/smithsonian+national+museum+of+american+history/@38.8912835,-77.0322449,17z>

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